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ABSTRACT

When faced with the challenging idea that they too, must write as part of their job as teachers, most of the graduate students in an English education class voiced deep frustration about and resistance to such a request. They heatedly argued that their teaching and course loads allowed them little or no time to write, that it was unreasonable to expect them to do so, and that writing is best left to college professors who can find the time for it. However, these complaints do not discount the imperative that every teacher of English should spend some time at the task of writing. In any job that a teacher might be faced with, a dedicated professional will always be able to find time to write. Instead of discarding writing because of busy schedules, commitments must be reviewed and time set aside for composition. Primarily, writing instructors should be practicing actively what they profess to teach. Writing improves writing skills, and doing what the students do creates a bond between teacher and student. The decision to cut out all creative or professional writing activities is irresponsible for any teacher of English. (HB)

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"Make Room For Writing"

A few weeks ago, I was stressing to my graduate English education students that they, too, must write. Almost immediately a student raised his hand and said, "That's ridiculous. You college professors expect far too much of us, and I'm sick of it. I have absolutely no time to write, and I resent it that you expect me to do so. If you would come into our classrooms, you'd know how little time we have for teaching writing, much less doing any of our own."

The discussion that followed was heated--and vitriolic. Everyone had a strong opinion, mainly differing from my own. For the most part, my educators absolutely and unequivocally stated that they should not be expected to write, that they do not have the time to write, and that writing is best left to college professors who are given release time for writing.

The feelings of my teachers astounded me. I had no idea that such an antipathy towards personal writing existed, much less was almost unanimously shared.

Frankly, as a former middle school educator, this attitude saddens and disappoints me. You see, I began my middle-school English teaching career in a small town, housed in a crummy old building that used to be the high school. We did not have air-

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conditioning, carpeting, a xerox machine, in-school suspension, teacher aides, nice desks, or even a full-time principal.

Most of the time we had heat in the winter, enough textbooks to go around, and a ditto machine that worked. We always had to share bathrooms with the students, taught several courses at various grade levels in one day, chaperoned, coached, assisted, pried open lockers, and had at least 30 students in each class. Nevertheless, I usually found time for writing, even though I had more responsibilities than the average teacher I see in my classrooms today. It never occured to me not to write; being an English teacher meant that I would not only be teaching reading and writing, but doing some as well.

Now that I am on the curriculum and instruction faculty at a university, I work with all sorts of teachers. I have never, ever, had an educational position as demanding and time-consuming as this one. But I still read and write, not because my job now demands it, but because I am an English educator and that is what I have done and will continue to do.

So, now as a college professor, I would again like to express my disappointment with my students' attitudes concerning personal writing. Public school teachers seem to feel that they should be exempt from writing because they do not have the time, but I manage to write without having the time to do so, either.

Granted, writing time is considered part of my job--on paper, that is. Although I am not in the classroom from 8:30 to 3:30 I am certainly not home napping inbetween classes. Like my students, I face a million and one other things that should have

been completed yesterday. Basically, my "release time" for writing means I have all evening, weekends, and holidays free for composing.

Frankly, I hear this attitude against personal writing increasingly expressed by my educator-students, and it scares me. I call it the "ditto mentality," for I hear more and more teachers in my classroom essentially saying, "I don't have time to do/present/read/create; just give me a ditto for Monday morning."

As a former public school educator, I do indeed recognize that feeling--I may have said those words a few times myself--but as a college professor with a heart of middle school, I do not believe it for a second. No one, including myself, has ever said teaching was going to be quick or easy. Personal writing takes time; educators must accept this. Writing should not be discarded due to busy schedules; instead we need to review commitments and find a place for writing. It can be done.

Of course I believe all English teachers should write. (I think they should read, too, but I never receive any complaints about that.) They should write because they teach others to write, because it is a large part of their job, because they should be interested in doing so, and because finishing a piece of writing allows for satisfaction. It is hard, some days, to find satisfaction in teaching. (Yes, college teaching is just as hard; my students are older and bigger, not necessarily nicer.)

Mind you, I am not advocating that public school English teachers must begin churning out the great American novel or

producing pages and pages of perfect prose. But it is, to me, absolutely essential that we all practice to at least some degree what we teach. I do not want students taught writing by someone who does not write any more than I want them to be taught reading by someone who does not read. And etcetera. As English educators, we went into the profession because we enjoyed reading and writing; we understood those demands on our time. What has happened to us?

As English educators, we all know the importance of writing, and I recently asked some of my few students who say they write how and why they utilize writing. For why, they told me that the more their students write, the better quality writing they produce. They write themselves for this reason, but more importantly, they write because they feel it creates a bond between them and their students. In these classrooms, teacher and students write and share alike. These teachers write because they want to, because they have something to say, and because it is their job to teach students to write.

As for the how, my students have reorganized their classrooms, allowing more time for writing. You will not find endless grammar exercises here, or five-paragraph themes; you will find the writing process, peer tutoring, writing folders, and plenty of praise, sharing, and encouragement. As for their own writing, my students make time for it because it is a priority for them, not a chore.

To me, this is what an English class is all about. If writing is a priority, then good writing will occur. The same

goes for reading. I am sorry, but I do not think I trust an English teacher who tells me that writing is not a priority. How can writing not be a priority to an English teacher, and if it is not, then what is?

It seems obvious that English teachers must seriously consider doing some personal writing. I am not asking anyone to become a professional writer, but I do expect all English teachers to write because that is why we went to school, what we teach, what we do--what we are. Not to write because we do not feel it is necessary or part of our job description or because we are too busy or because the teacher next door does not is scary, it is dumb, and above all, it is irresponsible to those who matter the most: our students and ourselves.